AN

INVESTIGATION

OF

The Cause

OF THE PRESENT

HIGH PRICE OF PROVISIONS.

BY THE AUTHOR OF THE ESSAY ON THE PRINCIPLE OF POPULATION.

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AN

INVESTIGATION,

&c.

AMONG the many cauſes that have been aſſigned of the preſent high price of proviſions, I am much inclined to ſuſpect, that the principal one has hitherto eſcaped detection; at leaſt, in the diſcuſſions on the ſubject, either in print or converſation, which have fallen within my knowledge, the cauſe, which I conceive to have operated moſt ſtrongly towards increaſing the price of the neceſſaries of life, has not yet been ſuggeſted. There are ſome diſorders, which, though they ſcarcely admit of a cure, or even of any conſiderable mitigation, are ſtill capable of being made greatly worſe. In ſuch misfortunes it is of great importance to know the deſperate nature of

the diſeaſe. The next ſtep to the alleviation of pain, is the bearing it with compoſure, and not aggravating it by impatience and irritation.

It cannot admit of a doubt with perſons of ſenſe and information, that, during the laſt year, there was a ſcarcity, to a certain extent, of all ſorts of grain; but it muſt be at the ſame time acknowledged, that the price was higher than the degree of that ſcarcity would at firſt ſight appear to warrant.

In the Summer of 1799, in the courſe of a northern tour, I paſſed through Sweden. There was at that time a general dearth of corn throughout the country, owing to a long drought the preceding year. In the province of Wurmland, adjoining to Norway, it approached almoſt to a famine, and the lower claſſes of people ſuffered moſt ſevere diſtreſs. At the time we were paſſing through that part of the country, which was in July, they were reduced to two moſt miſerable ſubſtitutes for bread; one, made of the inner bark of the fir, and the other, of the common ſorrel dried, and powdered. Theſe ſubſtances, though made into the uſual ſhape of their rye bread, had no affinity to it whatever in taſte, and but very little, I believe, in nouriſhment, as the effects of this miſerable food were but too viſible in their pallid and unhealthy countenances.

There

There could be little doubt, that the degree of ſcarcity then prevailing in that part of Sweden, was conſiderably greater than any we have hitherto experienced here; and yet, as far as we could learn, the price of rye, which is the grain principally uſed for bread, had not riſen above double its uſual average; whereas in this country laſt year, in a ſcarcity, that muſt be acknowledged to be very greatly inferior in degree, wheat roſe to above three times its former price.

The continuation of extraordinary high prices, after a harveſt that was at one time looked forward to as abundant, has contributed ſtill more to aſtoniſh and perplex the public mind. Many men of ſenſe have joined in the univerſal cry of the common people, that there muſt be roguery ſomewhere; and the general indignation has fallen upon monopolizers, foreſtallers, and regraters—words, that are vented from every mouth with fearful execrations, and are applied indiſcriminately to all middle men whatever, to every kind of trader that goes between the grower of the commodity and the conſumer.

This popular clamour, headed by the Lord Chief Juſtice, and enforced throughout the country by the inſtructions of the grand juries, muſt make every reflecting mind tremble for the

 future

future ſupply of our markets. I cannot but think, therefore, that I ſhould do an acceptable ſervice, if I could ſucceed in accounting for the preſent high price of the neceſſaries of life, without criminating a claſs of men, who, I believe, have been accuſed unjuſtly, and who, every political economiſt muſt know, are abſolutely neceſſary in the complicated machinery that diſtributes the proviſions and other commodities of a large nation.

I ought firſt to premiſe, however, that I am not intereſted in this queſtion, further than as a lover of truth, and a well-wiſher to my country. I have no ſort of connection whatever with any of theſe middle men or great farmers, who are now the objects of public indignation: and, as an individual with a ſmall fixed income, I am certainly among that claſs of perſons on whom the high price of proviſions muſt fall the heavieſt.

To proceed to the point: I am moſt ſtrongly inclined to ſuſpect, that the attempt in moſt parts of the kingdom to increaſe the pariſh allowances in proportion to the price of corn, combined with the riches of the country, which have enabled it to proceed as far as it has done in this attempt, is, comparatively ſpeaking, the ſole cauſe, which has occaſioned the price of proviſions in this

country

country to riſe ſo much higher than the degree of ſcarcity would ſeem to warrant, ſo much higher than it would do in any other country where this cauſe did not operate.

It may appear, perhaps, at firſt, to the reader, that this cauſe is inadequate to the effect we experience; but, if he will kindly allow me a few minutes of patient and candid attention, I hope I ſhall be able to convince him, that it is not only adequate to produce the preſent high price of proviſions of which we complain; but, admitting a real ſcarcity, that the attempt to carry it actually into execution, might raiſe the quartern loaf before the expiration of a year, to as many ſhillings as it is now pence.

Adam Smith has moſt juſtly ſtated, that the actual price at which a commodity is ſold, is compounded of its natural price, the price at which it can be brought to market, allowing the uſual profit in times of moderate plenty, and the proportion of the ſupply to the demand. When any commodity is ſcarce, its natural price is neceſſarily forgotten, and its actual price is regulated by the exceſs of the demand above the ſupply.

Let us ſuppoſe a commodity in great requeſt by fifty people, but of which, from ſome failure in its production, there is only ſufficient to ſupply forty. If the fortieth man from the top have two

ſhillings which he can ſpend in this commodity, and the thirty-nine above him, more, in various proportions, and the ten below, all leſs, the actual price of the article, according to the genuine principles of trade, will be two ſhillings. If more be aſked, the whole will not be ſold, becauſe there are only forty who have as much as two ſhillings to ſpend in the article; and there is no reaſon for aſking leſs, becauſe the whole may be diſpoſed of at that ſum.

Let us ſuppoſe, now, that ſomebody gives the ten poor men, who were excluded, a ſhilling apiece. The whole fifty can now offer two ſhillings, the price which was before aſked. According to every genuine principle of fair trading, the commodity muſt immediately riſe. If it do not, I would aſk, upon what principle are ten, out of the fifty who are all able to offer two ſhillings, to be rejected? For ſtill, according to the ſuppoſition, there is only enough for forty. The two ſhillings of a poor man are juſt as good as the two ſhillings of a rich one; and, if we interfere to prevent the commodity from riſing out of the reach of the pooreſt ten, whoever they may be, we muſt toſs up, draw lots, raffle, or fight, to determine who are to be excluded. It would be beyond my preſent purpoſe, to enter into the queſtion whether

ther any of these modes would be more eligible, for the distribution of the commodities of a country, than the sordid distinction of money; but certainly, according to the customs of all civilized and enlightened nations, and according to every acknowledged principle of commercial dealing, the price must be allowed to rise to that point which will put it beyond the power of ten out of the fifty to purchase. This point will, perhaps, be half-a-crown or more, which will now become the price of the commodity. Let another shilling a-piece be given to the excluded ten: all will now be able to offer half-a-crown. The price must in consequence immediately rise to three shillings or more, and so on *toties quoties*.

In the progress of this operation the ten excluded would not be always entirely the same. The richest of the ten first excluded, would probably be raised above the poorest of the first forty. Small changes of this kind must take place. The additional allowances to the poorest, and the weight of the high prices on those above them, would tend to level the two orders; but, till a complete level had taken place, ten must be always excluded, and the price would always be fixed, as nearly as possible, at that sum which the fortieth man at the top could afford to give. This,

if the donatives were continued, would raiſe the commodity to an extraordinary price, without the ſuppoſition of any combination and conſpiracy among the venders, or any kind of unfair dealing whatever.

The riſe in the price of corn, and of other proviſions, in this country, has been effected exactly in the ſame manner, though the operation may be a little more complicated; and I am firmly convinced, that it never could have reached its preſent height, but from the ſyſtem of poor laws and pariſh allowances, which have operated preciſely in the ſame mode as the donatives of a ſhilling in the inſtance I have juſt adduced.

The harveſt of 1799 was bad, both in quality and quantity. Few people could deny that there appeared to be a very conſiderable deficiency of produce: and the price of the load of wheat roſe in conſequence almoſt immediately to £. 20. I returned from the North in the beginning of November, and found the alarm ſo great and general, and the price of corn ſo high, that I remember thinking that it was probably fully adequate to the degree of the deficiency, and, taking into conſideration the proſpect of importation from the very early alarm, that it would not riſe much higher during the year. In this conjecture, it

appears that I was much miſtaken; but I have very little doubt that in any other country equally rich, yet without the ſyſtem of poor laws and pariſh allowances, the price would never have exceeded £.25 the load of wheat; and that this ſum would have been ſufficiently high to have excluded ſuch a number of people from their uſual conſumption, as to make the deficient crop, with the quantity imported, laſt throughout the year.

The ſyſtem of poor laws, and pariſh allowances, in this country, and I will add, to their honour, the humanity and generoſity of the higher and middle claſſes of ſociety, naturally and neceſſarily altered this ſtate of things. The poor complained to the juſtices that their wages would not enable them to ſupply their families in the ſingle article of bread. The juſtices very humanely, and I am far from ſaying improperly, liſtened to their complaints, inquired what was the ſmalleſt ſum on which they could ſupport their families, at the then price of wheat, and gave an order of relief on the pariſh accordingly. The poor were now enabled, for a ſhort time, to purchaſe nearly their uſual quantity of flour; but the ſtock in the country was not ſufficient, even with the proſpect of importation, to allow of the uſual diſtribution

to all its members. The crop was consuming too fast. Every market-day the demand exceeded the supply; and those whose business it was to judge on these subjects, felt convinced, that in a month or two the scarcity would be greater than it was at that time. Those who were able, therefore, kept back their corn. In so doing, they undoubtedly consulted their own interest; but they, as undoubtedly, whether with the intention or not is of no consequence, consulted the true interest of the state: for, if they had not kept it back, too much would have been consumed, and there would have been a famine instead of a scarcity at the end of the year.

The corn, therefore, naturally rose. The poor were again distressed. Fresh complaints were made to the justices, and a further relief granted; but, like the water from the mouth of Tantalus, the corn still slipped from the grasp of the poor; and rose again so as to disable them from purchasing a sufficiency to keep their families in health. The alarm now became still greater, and more general *. The justices in their individual capa-

* I am describing what took place in the neighbourhood where I then lived; and I have reason to believe that something nearly similar took place in most counties of the kingdom.

cities

cities were not thought competent to determine on the proper modes of relief in the preſent criſis, a general meeting of the magiſtrates was called, aided by the united wiſdom of other gentlemen of the county; but the reſult was merely the continuation and extenſion of the former ſyſtem of relief; and, to ſay the truth, I hardly ſee what elſe could have been done. In ſome pariſhes this relief was given in the ſhape of flour; in others, which was certainly better, in money, accompanied with a recommendation not to ſpend the whole of it in wheaten bread, but to adopt ſome other kind of food. All, however, went upon the principle of inquiring what was the uſual conſumption of flour in the different families, and of enabling them to purchaſe nearly the ſame quantity that they did before the ſcarcity. With this additional command of money in the lower claſſes, and the conſequent increaſed conſumption, the number of purchaſers at the then price would naturally exceed the ſupply. The corn would in conſequence continue riſing. The poor's rates in many pariſhes increaſed from four ſhillings in the pound to fourteen; the price of wheat neceſſarily kept pace with them; and before the end of the year was at near forty pounds a load; when probably

bably without the operation of this cauſe it would not have exceeded twenty or twenty-five.

Some of the poor would naturally make uſe of their additional command of money to purchaſe butter, cheeſe, bacon, pickled pork, rice, potatoes, &c. Theſe commodities are all more limited in quantity than corn; and would, therefore, more ſuddenly feel the increaſed demand. If butter, cheeſe, bacon, pickled pork, and the coarſer parts of meat, had continued at their uſual price, they would have been purchaſed by ſo many, to come in aid of an inferior kind of bread, or to give a reliſh and additional nouriſhment to their potatoes and rice, that the ſupply would not have been half adequate to the quantity of theſe articles that was wanted. Theſe commodities, therefore, roſe as naturally and as neceſſarily as the corn; and, according to the genuine principles of fair trade, their price was fixed at that ſum which only ſuch a number could afford to give, as would enable the ſupply to anſwer the demand.

To fix upon this ſum is the great object of every dealer and ſpeculator in every commodity whatever, and about which he muſt, of courſe, exerciſe his private judgment. A reflecting mind,

mind, far from being aſtoniſhed that there are now and then errors in ſpeculation, muſt feel much greater aſtoniſhment that there are ſo few; and that the ſupplies of a large nation, whether plentiful or ſcanty, ſhould be diſtributed ſo equally throughout the year. Moſt happily for ſociety, individual intereſt is, in theſe caſes, ſo cloſely and intimately interwoven with the public intereſt, that one cannot gain or loſe without a gain or loſs to the other. The man who refuſes to ſend his corn to market when it is at twenty pounds a load, becauſe he thinks that in two months time it will be at thirty, if he be right in his judgment, and ſucceed in his ſpeculation, is a poſitive and decided benefactor to the ſtate; becauſe he keeps his ſupply to that period when the ſtate is much more in want of it; and if he and ſome others did not keep it back in that manner, inſtead of its being thirty in two months, it would be forty or fifty.

If he be wrong in his ſpeculation, he loſes perhaps very conſiderably himſelf, and the ſtate ſuffers a little; becauſe, had he brought his corn to market at twenty, the price would have fallen ſooner, and the event ſhowed that there was corn enough in the country to allow of it; but the ſlight evil that the ſtate ſuffers in this caſe

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is almoſt wholly compenſated by the glut in the market, when the corn is brought out, which makes the price fall below what it would have been otherwiſe.

I am far from ſaying that there can be no ſuch thing as monopoly, and the other hard words that have been ſo much talked of. In a commodity of a confined nature, within the purchaſe of two or three large capitals, or of a company of merchants, we all know that it has often exiſted; and, in a very few inſtances, the article may have been in part deſtroyed, to enhance the price, as the Dutch Company deſtroyed the nutmeg-trees in their ſpice iſlands: but in an article which is in ſo many hands as corn is, in this country, monopoly, to any pernicious extent, may ſafely be pronounced impoſſible. Where are the capitals, or where is the company of merchants, rich enough to buy ſuch a quantity of corn, as would make it anſwer to them to deſtroy, or, which is the ſame thing, not to ſell a great part of it? As they could not, by the greateſt exertions, purchaſe one fourth of all the corn in the country, it is evident that, if any conſiderable part of their ſtock remained unſold, they would have enriched all the other dealers in corn at their own expenſe;

and would not have gained half ſo much in proportion to their capital as the reſt of the farmers and cornfactors. If on the contrary all their ſtock ſold, it would be a proof that the ſpeculation had been juſt, and that the country had really benefited by it.

It ſeems now to be univerſally agreed, that the ſtock of old corn remaining on hand at the beginning of the harveſt this year was unuſually ſmall, notwithſtanding that the harveſt came on nearly a month ſooner than could have been expected in the beginning of June. This is a clear, decided, and unanſwerable proof that there had been no ſpeculations in corn that were prejudicial to the country. All that the large farmers and cornfactors had done, was to raiſe the corn to that price which excluded a ſufficient number from their uſual conſumption, to enable the ſupply to laſt throughout the year. This price, however, has been moſt eſſentially and powerfully affected by the ability that has been given to the labouring poor, by means of pariſh allowances, of continuing to purchaſe wheat notwithſtanding its extraordinary riſe: and this ability muſt neceſſarily prevent the price of corn from falling very materially, till there is an actual glut in the market; for, while the whole ſtock will go off at

thirty

thirty pounds a load, it cannot, on any regular principle of trade, ſink lower. I was in very great hopes, juſt before the harveſt, that ſuch a glut was about to take place; but it is now to be feared, from the nature of the preſent crop, that no ſuch happy event can be hoped for during the year.

I do not know whether I have convinced my reader that the cauſe which I have aſſigned of the preſent extraordinary price of proviſions is adequate to the effect; but I certainly feel moſt ſtrongly convinced of it myſelf; and I cannot but believe that, if he differ from me, it can only be in degree, and from thinking that the principle of pariſh allowances has not yet been carried far enough to produce any material effect. With regard to the principle itſelf, if it were really carried into execution, it appears to me capable almoſt of mathematical demonſtration, that, granting a real ſcarcity of one-fourth, which could not be remedied by importation, it is adequate to the effecting any height of price that the proportion of the circulating medium to the quantity of corn daily conſumed would admit.

It has often been propoſed, and more than once I believe, in the Houſe of Commons, to proportion the price of labour exactly to the

price

price of provisions. This, though it would be always a bad plan, might pass tolerably in years of moderate plenty, or in a country that was in the habit of a considerable exportation of grain. But let us see what would be its operation in a real scarcity. We suppose, for the sake of the argument, that by law every kind of labour is to be paid accurately in proportion to the price of corn, and that the rich are to be assessed to the utmost to support those in the same manner who are thrown out of employment, and fall upon the parish. We allow the scarcity to be an irremediable deficiency of one fourth of all the provisions of the country. It is evident that, notwithstanding this deficiency, there would be no reason for economy in the labouring classes. The rise of their wages, or the parish allowances that they would receive, would enable them to purchase exactly the same quantity of corn, or other provisions, that they did before, whatever their price might be. The same quantity would of course be consumed; and, according to the regular principles of trade, as the stock continued diminishing, the price of all the necessaries of life would continue rising, in the most rapid and unexampled manner. The middle classes of society would very soon be blended

with the poor; and the largeſt fortunes could not long ſtand againſt the accumulated preſſure of the extraordinary price of proviſions, on the one hand, and the ſtill more extraordinary aſſeſſments for allowances to thoſe who had no other means of ſupport, on the other. The corn-factors and farmers would undoubtedly be the laſt that ſuffered, but, at the expiration of the three quarters of a year, what they received with one hand, they muſt give away with the other; and a moſt complete levelling of all property would take place. All would have the ſame quantity of money. All the proviſions of the country would be conſumed: and all the people would ſtarve together.

There is no kind of fear, that any ſuch tragical event ſhould ever happen in any country; but allowed myſelf to make the ſuppoſition; becauſe, it appears to me, that, in the complicated machinery of human ſociety, the effect of any particular principle frequently eſcapes from the view, even of an attentive obſerver, if it be not magnified by puſhing it to extremity.

I do not, however, by any means, intend to infer, from what I have ſaid, that the pariſh allowances have been prejudicial to the ſtate; or that, as far as the ſyſtem has been hitherto purſued,

purſued, or is likely to be purſued, in this country, that it is not one of the beſt modes of relief that the circumſtances of the caſe will admit. The ſyſtem of the poor laws, in geneneral, I certainly do moſt heartily condemn, as I have expreſſed in another place, but I am inclined to think that their operation in the preſent ſcarcity has been advantageous to the country. The principal benefit which they have produced, is exactly that which is moſt bitterly complained of—the high price of all the neceſſaries of life. The poor cry out loudly at this price; but, in ſo doing, they are very little aware of what they are about; for it has undoubtedly been owing to this price that a much greater number of them has not been ſtarved.

It was calculated that there were only two-thirds of an average crop laſt year. Probably, even with the aid of all that we imported, the deficiency ſtill remained a fifth or ſixth. Suppoſing ten millions of people in the iſland; the whole of this deficiency, had things been left to their natural courſe, would have fallen almoſt excluſively on two, or perhaps three millions of the pooreſt inhabitants, a very conſiderable number of whom muſt in conſequence have ſtarved. The operation of the pariſh al-

lowances, by raiſing the price of proviſions ſo high, cauſed the diſtreſs to be divided among five or ſix millions, perhaps, inſtead of two or three, and to be by no means unfelt even by the remainder of the population.

The high price, therefore, which is ſo much complained of by the poor, has eſſentially mitigated their diſtreſs by bringing down to their level two or three millions more, and making them almoſt equal ſharers in the preſſure of the ſcarcity.

The further effects of the high price have been to enforce a ſtrict economy in all ranks of life; to encourage an extraordinary importation, and to animate the farmer by the powerful motive of ſelf-intereſt to make every exertion to obtain as great a crop as poſſible the next year.

If economy, importation, and every poſſible encouragement to future production, have not the faireſt chance of putting an end to the ſcarcity, I confeſs myſelf at a loſs to ſay what better means can be ſubſtituted. I may undoubtedly on this ſubject be much miſtaken; but to me, I own, they appear more calculated to anſwer the purpoſe intended, than the hanging any number of farmers and cornfactors that could be named.

No

No inference, therefore, is meant to be drawn againſt what has been done for the relief of the poor in the preſent ſcarcity, though it has without doubt greatly raiſed the price of proviſions. All that I contend for is, that we ſhould be aware of the effect of what we ourſelves have done, and not lay the blame on the wrong perſons.

If the cauſe, which I have detailed, be ſufficient to account for the preſent high price of proviſions, without the ſuppoſition of any unfair dealing among the farmers and cornfactors, we ought ſurely to bear the preſent preſſure like men labouring under a diſorder that muſt have its courſe, and not throw obſtacles in the way of returning plenty, and endanger the future ſupplies of our markets, by encouraging the popular clamour, and keeping the farmers and corn-dealers in perpetual fear for their lives and property.

To ſuppoſe that a year of ſcarcity can paſs without diſtreſſing ſeverely a large part of the inhabitants of a country, is to ſuppoſe a contradiction in the nature of things. I know of no other definition of a ſcarcity than the failure of the uſual quantity of proviſions; and if a great part of the people had but juſt enough before, they muſt undoubtedly have leſs than enough at

ſuch a period. With regard to the ſcarcity being artificial, it appears to me ſo impoſſible, that, till it has been proved that ſome man or ſet of men, with a capital of twenty or thirty millions ſterling, has bought up half the corn in the country, I own I muſt ſtill diſbelieve it. On this ſubject, however, I know that I differ from ſome very reſpectable friends of mine, among the common people, who ſay that it is quite impoſſible that there can be a real ſcarcity, becauſe you may get what quantity of corn you pleaſe, if you have but money enough; and to ſay the truth, many perſons, who ought to be better informed, argue exactly in the ſame way. I have often talked with labouring men on this ſubject, and endeavoured to ſhow them, that if they, or I, had a great deal of money, and other people had but little, we could undoubtedly buy what quantity of corn we liked, by taking away the ſhares of thoſe who were leſs rich; but that if all the people had the ſame ſum, and that there was not enough corn in the country to ſupply all, we could not get what we wanted for money, though we poſſeſſed millions. I never found, however, that my rhetoric produced much impreſſion.

The cry at preſent is in favour of ſmall farms,

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and againſt middle men. No two clamours can well be more inconſiſtent with each other, as the deſtruction of the middle men would, I conceive, neceſſarily involve with it the deſtruction of ſmall farmers. The ſmall farmer requires a quick return of his ſcanty capital to enable him to pay his rent and his workmen; and muſt therefore ſend his corn to market almoſt immediately after harveſt. If he were required to perform the office of corn-dealer, as well as farmer, and wait to regulate his ſupplies to the demands of the markets, a double capital would be abſolutely neceſſary to him, and not having that, he would be ruined.

Many men of ſenſe and information have attributed the dearneſs of proviſions to the quantity of paper in circulation. There was undoubtedly great reaſon for apprehenſion, that when, by the ſtoppage of the Bank to pay in ſpecie, the emiſſion of paper ceaſed to have its natural check, the circulation would be overloaded with this currency; but this certainly could not have taken place to any conſiderable extent without a ſenſible depreciation of bank notes in compariſon with ſpecie. As this depreciation did not happen, the progreſs of the evil muſt have been ſlow and gradual, and never could

could have produced the ſudden and extraordinary riſe in the price of proviſions which was ſo ſenſibly felt laſt year, after a ſeaſon of moderate cheapneſs, ſubſequent to the ſtoppage of the Bank.

There is one circumſtance, however, that ought to be attended to. To circulate the ſame, or nearly the ſame *, quantity of commodities through a country, when they bear a much higher price, muſt require a greater quantity of the medium, whatever that may be. The circulation naturally takes up more. It is probable, therefore, that the Bank has found it neceſſary to iſſue a greater number of its notes on this account. Or, if it has not, this deficiency has been ſupplied by the country bankers, who have found that their notes now ſtay out longer, and in greater quantity, than they did before the ſcarcity, which may tempt many to overtrade their capitals. If the quantity of paper, therefore, in circulation has greatly increaſed during the laſt year, I ſhould be inclined to conſider it rather as the effect than the cauſe of the high price of proviſions. This fulneſs of circulating

* In a ſcarcity the quantity of commodities in circulation is probably not ſo great as in years of plenty.

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medium, however, will be one of the obſtacles in the way to returning cheapneſs.

The public attention is now fixed with anxiety towards the meeting of Parliament, which is to relieve us from our preſent difficulties; but the more conſiderate do not feel very ſanguine on this ſubject, knowing how little is to be done in this ſpecies of diſtreſs by legiſlative interference. We interfere to fix the aſſize of bread. Perhaps one of the beſt interferences of the Legiſlature, in the preſent inſtance, would be to aboliſh that aſſize. I have certainly no tendency to believe in combinations and conſpiracies; but the great interval that elapſes between the fall of wheat and the fall of flour, compared with the quick ſucceſſion of the riſe of flour to the riſe of wheat, would almoſt tempt one to ſuppoſe, that there might be ſome little management in the return of the meal weighers to the Lord Mayor. If the public ſuffer in this inſtance, it is evidently owing to the aſſize, without which, the opportunity of any ſuch management would not exiſt. And what occaſion can there be for an aſſize in a city like London, in which there are ſo many bakers? If ſuch a regulation were ever neceſſary, it would appear to be moſt ſo in a country village or ſmall town,

where perhaps there is but one perſon in the trade, and who might, therefore, for a time, have an opportunity of impoſing on his cuſtomers; but this could not take place where there was ſuch room for competition as in London. If there were no aſſize, more attention would be conſtantly paid to the weight and quality of the bread bought; and the bakers who ſold the beſt in theſe two reſpects would have the moſt cuſtom. The removal of this regulation would remove, in a great meaſure, the difficulty about brown bread, and a much greater quantity of it would probably be conſumed.

The ſoup-ſhops, and every attempt to make a nouriſhing and palatable food of what was before not in uſe among the common people, muſt evidently be of great ſervice in the preſent diſtreſs.

It is a fact now generally acknowledged, and it has lately received an official ſanction in a letter of the Duke of Portland to the Lord Lieutenant of the county of Oxford, that of late years, even in the beſt ſeaſons, we have not grown corn ſufficient for our own conſumption; whereas, twenty years ago, we were in the conſtant habit of exporting grain to a very conſiderable amount. Though we may ſuppoſe that

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the agriculture of the country has not been increaſing, as it ought to have done, during this period; yet we cannot well imagine that it has gone backwards. To what then can we attribute the preſent inability in the country to ſupport its inhabitants, but to the increaſe of population? I own that I cannot but conſider the late ſevere preſſures of diſtreſs on every deficiency in our crops, as a very ſtrong exemplification of a principle which I endeavoured to explain in an eſſay publiſhed about two years ago, entitled, *An Eſſay on the Principle of Population, as it affects the future Improvement of Society*. It was conſidered by many who read it, merely as a ſpecious argument, inapplicable to the preſent ſtate of ſociety; becauſe it contradicted ſome preconceived opinions on theſe ſubjects. Two years reflection have, however, ſerved ſtrongly to convince me of the truth of the principle there advanced, and of its being the real cauſe of the continued depreſſion and poverty of the lower claſſes of ſociety, of the total inadequacy of all the preſent eſtabliſhments in their favour to relieve them, and of the periodical returns of ſuch ſeaſons of diſtreſs as we have of late experienced.

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The eſſay has now been out of print above a year; but I have deferred giving another edition of it in the hope of being able to make it more worthy of the public attention, by applying the principle directly and excluſively to the exiſting ſtate of ſociety, and endeavouring to illuſtrate the power and univerſality of its operation from the beſt authenticated accounts that we have of the ſtate of other countries. Particular engagements in the former part of the time, and ſome moſt unforeſeen and unfortunate interruptions latterly, have hitherto prevented me from turning my attention, with any effect, towards this ſubject. I ſtill, however, have it in view. In the mean time I hope that this haſty attempt to add my mite to the public ſtock of information, in the preſent emergency, will be received with candour.

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THE END.